

GOETHE MEDAL 2024

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY ISKRA GESHOSKA

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- Check against delivery -

Culture is not some solid pantheon. It is not something to be worshipped. The idea of culture is the idea of protest, of reality, of action, of struggle, of constant change, of confrontation against grand narratives and the imposed field of power. (Terry Eagleton)

This is a time of absence of ideologies, of trapped utopias, of interrupted dreams. A time full of “traps and nets for unsuspecting birds”, as Friedrich Nietzsche put it in a certain context, describing, probably also seemingly well-intentioned edicts from the public that this is not the time to express certain standpoints, because those standpoints, which may be dissenting and critical, is what will trap the bird in the cage of social disgrace. But there is always that nearly invisible call for a change in the usual narratives, value-based assessments and inert habits imposed from somewhere above, by the state and the ideological apparatuses. And I will have to go back to Nietzsche, who says that precisely what he needs, and which is also the thing that slips out of life's embrace, can only be obtained in a creative, artistic, meta-way, because, according to him, that is why creativity and art exist - to create a new reality, new narratives wherever politics is unable or refuses to do so. It is the combined creative action and confrontation that can recreate the free spirits again and again, colour the discoloured everyday, crack a crevice of freedom, of playfulness, in the dead social tissue.

The sufferings of the millions of poor, abject, humiliated and downtrodden all over a planet which is literally screaming in pain because we are wounding her every day as a result of our foolishness and greed, go almost unnoticed - we arrogantly ignore the pain and suffering of thousands of people, because those “deaths” are happening “somewhere far away”, not in our own “civilized and emancipated” and “well-manicured” backyard. But even here, nearby, our

arrogance was plunged into a confrontation with death, with the finiteness. We are now suffering in solidarity, albeit once again, with variables in terms of our privileges.

It is high time we faced out mortality, our finitude, our transience, the possibility of loss, because that may be the only way to understand the need for care, solidarity and empathy.

Only by facing the fragility of the time we are in, with the entropy that is happening from heaven to earth, only by acknowledging and constantly listening to the screaming world, can we talk not only about culture but, in general, about the future of communities, in this listless, anesthetized state, in which everything that constituted a core benefit and that we are still dreaming of, is in danger of crashing into the abyss. Therefore, we need to think about culture, rethink its role, explain its meaning anew. This is the reinforced steel structure that permeates any social dynamic. And it, in a time of emergency, in a time when the so-called “normalcy” has been derailed, in a time of urgency, of suffering, has always been the zone through which, on the one hand, the political is summarized and critically reimagined, and on the other hand, new options are offered for its expression, but also for its social appearance. In times of crisis, in tension, in suffering, in revolt, culture does not die, but gives birth to different formats which serve as basis for further survival. We have witnessed this throughout history. In wars, in captivity, in oppression, artists have always participated and fought proactively with their creativity, but also with their voice, manifesting and strategically advocating for, mainly, the new vision of the political.

When I dream of the idea about the broad field of culture, in the narrative of my dream I move and thread, sometimes with a heavy step, sometimes nearly levitating, through all the challenges that this life, trapped in some kind of governmental, social, political and historical networks, articulates through culture, through its labyrinths, through its multifaceted and often contradictory texts. Through this dream I perceive all the suffering and the occasional joy that civilization has caused and is continuing to cause to humanity. This is exactly why I think that culture is a tool of serious confrontation, and thus transformation, not only in the scope of cultural and artistic activity, but also in the social attitudes, in the economic ambiguities, and in the (often mutilated) body politic. Particularly today, through it we can glimpse the

guidelines for the movement of both the economic and political capital – which is good, but also dangerous.

The cultural and artistic practices, deeply grounded in the simultaneous resistance and weaving of alternative social, political texts and languages, directly pierce, analyse, debate and interpret the terrifying image we live in today - environmental death, resource irresponsibility, human humiliation, bio-political entropic images - trying to shape themselves as a political subject that can intervene in the upcoming flows and changes related to the social body. Culture is not naive. It is a political tool to be handled with care and responsibility. With it, we shall either create a better world or obliterate what has remained of the existing one.

It is an anchor thrown in the harbour of constant “dissent”, of permanent resistance. I perceive the actions taken in the broad field of culture as a constant rebellion, confrontation and organisation of anger, but also a utopia for the transformation of the abject, the unjust, that contradicts the notions of community. When I reflect on culture, I think of it as an activity that implies constant, relentless steps towards designing artistic and cultural practices, which engage with all the other political and social positions.

Over the entire period of my engagement in the socio-cultural domain, both locally and internationally, I have advocated for the creation of communities and platforms for practice of the policies of friendship-making toward the common good, and complex critical battles in the Agora that would relentlessly give voice to the micro community. It is a fluid act of chivalry, rebellion, protest understood as a production of constructive and creative instability that fosters constant re-assessment and change. Because I deeply believe that one of the key tasks of culture and art is the creation of unstable and creatively conflicting situations, as well as constant watchful observation of the world around us that requires constant corrections of the patterns offered to us as if given “from above”.

The entropy of our time spreads like a spider’s web through all the capillaries, leading to more and more clots which prevent the creative juices from flowing freely through the blood vessels of culture, of society. Yet, fortunately, rare but quality attempts have emerged that persist in the shape of the strategies of dissent, of creative resistance, of representation for those

and that which is being pushed towards the social margins. It is here that I see the chance to stand against the official order precisely to give support to everyone, to those on the margins, to the voiceless.

Therefore, it is with immense honour and responsibility that I receive the Goethe Medal for 2024, together with my colleagues Claudia Cabera and Carmen Romero Quero. I want to express my deepest gratitude to the Board of Trustees of Goethe Institute for recognising the socio-cultural and political importance of the independent cultural sector in North Macedonia and wider, to the Goethe Institute - Skopje, which has played an exceptionally important role in support of the cultural policies in our society, to the German Embassy in North Macedonia for having the tremendous roll in emphasising the importance of the strong civil society, as well as everyone else who recognises the socio-political value and necessity of the work of the independent cultural sector through my work and through the work of my colleagues, partners and friends from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Kosovo, Vojvodina, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Austria, Germany, Spain, Czech, Slovakia, Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, Turkey. In the country that I come from, the Republic of North Macedonia, the work of the independent cultural sector is entirely pushed to the margins and the role of this sector is not valued in any terms. Thousands of people who try to contribute to developing critical contemporary culture float in the void of social and political space outside the state institutions, forgotten by the cultural policymakers. It is precisely at this point that the creators of cultural policies should take on the responsible role of semantic opening up, especially since a multicultural society is in question. Cultural policy should become a laboratory where we would constantly conceive new meanings, signs and values, and where the existing ones would be constantly re-examined and redefined. The ethno-national narratives should be abandoned as soon as possible, and emphasis should be placed on the inclusive, participatory, open civil models with broader socio-cultural significance. I expect the state policymakers in the area of culture to give political legitimacy to the wider community and civil sector, both at the institutional level and concerning the independent cultural sector, and not just uphold the dominant narrative of the ruling bloc.

In the end, let me summarise the significance that this act of great recognition holds for me.

Despite the numerous arguments that have often tempted me on this very issue, the only thing I still believe in is a community of shared ideas, visions, actions, reactions and creative confrontations. I believe in the politics of sharing and in the organic community that creates spaces of constant emancipation through critical (self) examination. I deeply believe that social dynamics can be supportive and open only by means of allowing free exchange of courageous individuals who manage to preserve their autonomy by getting together and creating strong and vibrant platforms of solidarity and unity in diversity. And most of all, I believe that no one can walk the walk alone, nor can they create any core values by themselves. That is why it is without any hesitation that I maintain that this recognition does not only belong to me but to all those that I have walked shoulder to shoulder with between the challenging socio-cultural Scylla and Charybdis, without turning a wax in the ears. The only way that we can exist is through relationships. And precisely because of that, I would like to thank you for all the shared battles, for all the shared stories, for all the jointly taken steps and attempts to make a difference, to create “another scene”, not to become a part of the crowd, and to constantly be alert and ready to oppose anyone who would reach for and try to jeopardise the autonomy in society, in culture, in aesthetic and ethical horizons. The Goethe Medal for 2024 belongs to all the people with whom I have jointly been trying to redefine the concepts of socio-cultural dynamics, the patterns of exercising power and interdisciplinary forms of contemporary cultural policies, as well as the capacities to create a caring and compassionate world, standing in solidarity by fostering and building critical culture. To all those with whom we jointly try to understand and strategically and tactically build the autonomous zones of social and cultural resistance against precarity, against inequality, against injustice, against authoritarian non-empathetic policies. Constant resistance. Without the idea of community, without the politics of friendship, we wouldn't even be able to dream up, let alone experience freedom and utopia. In countries such as North Macedonia, it is not easy to act independently and simultaneously create a socio-culturally and politically relevant space. It is difficult to penetrate and weave different, emancipatory, interdisciplinary, autonomous socio-cultural messages through the self-organised contemporary non-institutional action models. For twenty years already, Kontrapunkt and KRIK – the platform for critical culture, together with their friends, have been trying to stand in dissent yet deeply anchored through the rhizomatic communities that create critical culture texts. I am grateful to all the countless people who

have directly or indirectly been part of the politics of friendship and who have had an impact and directly participated in everything that Kontrapunkt and I have dreamed of and built.

A Bed for the Night

I hear that in New York
At the corner of 26th Street and Broadway
A man stands every evening during the winter months
And gets beds for the homeless there
By appealing to passers-by
It won't change the world
It won't improve relations among men
It will not shorten the age of exploitation
But a few men have a bed for the night
For a night, the wind is kept from them
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway.
Don't put down the book on reading this, man.
A few people have a bed for the night
For a night the wind is kept from them
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway
But it won't change the world It won't improve relations among men
It will not shorten the age of exploitation.
(Bertolt Brecht)